Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
Division of Planning and Development

Public Access to Shoreline Recreational Fishing in Narragansett Bay

Volume II

Evaluation of Alternative Sites for Fishing Access

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I. STUDY OVERVIEW

As the Ocean State's most prominent natural feature, Narragansett Bay is one of the greatest outdoor recreation resources of the State of Rhode Island. Its vast near-shore waters afford residents and visitors a multitude of recreational opportunities, including swimming, beach-going, boating, and fishing. The Bay also serves as a significant economic generator for Rhode Island through recreation, tourism, commercial fisheries, and other associated industries.

Although the State has over 400 miles of coastline along Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island Sound, there are currently no facilities in Rhode Island built for the explicit purpose of enhancing the public's access to shoreline recreational fishing in Narragansett Bay. Persons lacking boat access to the Bay typically gravitate to shoreline access sites known to offer a quality fishing experience, which are those offering a high likelihood of encountering and catching species of recreational value such as Striped Bass, Bluefish, etc. In addition to natural features such as beaches and points, resourceful recreational anglers will often make use of man-made shoreline features (including docks, jetties, bridges, and piers). While not built or designed for such purpose, these facilities often provide enhanced access to enjoy angling within bay waters.

As part of its directive to further maintain, develop, and promote outdoor recreational opportunities in the State, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) has commissioned a comprehensive evaluation of shoreline recreational fishing in Narragansett Bay. The intent of this evaluation is to inventory several existing shore-based recreational fishing access sites throughout Narragansett Bay, to assess the State's need and demand for enhanced recreational fishing opportunities, and to provide recommendations and guidance for future recreational fishing development initiatives by the State.

The Old Jamestown Bridge Site has been a focal point in the issue of shoreline fishing access in Rhode Island for several years. Spanning the West Passage of Narragansett Bay between the towns of North Kingstown and Jamestown, the Old Jamestown Bridge (Bridge No. 400) was closed to traffic in 1992 upon completion of the replacement structure, the Jamestown-Verrazano Bridge. During the design and construction of the Jamestown-Verrazano Bridge, it was originally envisioned that the westerly (North Kingstown) portion of the Old Jamestown Bridge would not be demolished and would remain for future development as a public recreational fishing pier and park. In 1987, Rhode Island General Law § 24-12-51.1 was passed, directing (a) the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) to retain a portion of the North Kingstown side of the Old Jamestown Bridge for use as a public fishing pier and (b) the RIDEM to develop and maintain a park on State-owned land adjacent to the bridge in North Kingstown.

While the Jamestown-Verrazano Bridge was completed and opened to traffic in 1992, the old bridge has not yet been removed. In the years that followed the completion of the new bridge, a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) was prepared for the Removal of the Old Jamestown Bridge in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (supplemental to the original EIS prepared for the replacement of the Old Jamestown Bridge). Bridge inspections and evaluations conducted for the design of the demolition contract revealed that the portion of the bridge originally designated to remain had deteriorated significantly, to the point where it was no longer feasible or prudent to rehabilitate the structure for development as a recreational fishing pier. Approved for distribution in March of 2004, the SEIS Record of Decision determined that the entire bridge structure should be removed.

The easterly three-fourths of the Old Jamestown Bridge will be demolished and removed by the RIDOT under Rhode Island Contract No. 2005-CB-035, which is anticipated to be complete by 2007. The remaining westerly portion of the bridge will be removed under a separate future contract, with the location of this structure and state-owned land being retained for potential recreational fishing development.

The first phase of this RIDEM shoreline recreational fishing access study consisted of a comprehensive evaluation of the Old Jamestown Bridge Site and its current suitability for potential development as a public fishing access facility. The analyses and findings of this undertaking are presented in *Volume 1: Evaluation of the Old Jamestown Bridge Site*.

Under the second phase of this study, several alternative fishing access sites within the Narragansett Bay study area (which includes Mount Hope Bay and the Sakonnet River) have been investigated and evaluated by the consultant team of Gordon R. Archibald, Inc. (GRA); Applied Bio-Systems, Inc.; and James H. McKenna, Ph.D. The purpose of these investigations is to determine if other shoreline access sites within this study area should be targeted for capital improvements in addition to (or instead of) the Old Jamestown Bridge Site. Through preliminary analyses and coordination, the RIDEM identified the following twenty two (22) existing public access locations along the study area shoreline for evaluation:

1. Former State Pier #2, Pawtucket
2. Gano Street Recreation Area, Providence
3. Sabin Point, East Providence
4. Palmer River Bridge, Barrington/Warren
5. Colt State Park, Bristol
6. Bristol Narrows, Bristol
7. Bristol Ferry Landing, Bristol
8. Sakonnet Point, Little Compton
9. Stone Bridge, Tiverton
10. Carr Point, Portsmouth
11. Burma Road, Middletown
12. Brenton Point, Newport
13. Van Zandt Pier, Newport
14. Fort Adams Channel Side, Newport
15. Fort Getty, Jamestown
16. Hull Cove, Jamestown
17. Fort Wetherill, Jamestown
18. Rome Point, North Kingstown
19. Quonset Point/Davisville/Allen Harbor, North Kingstown
20. Salter Grove, Warwick
21. Goddard Park, Warwick
22. URI Narragansett Bay Campus, Narragansett

The locations of these 22 sites (as well as Old Jamestown Bridge Site) within the Narragansett Bay study area are depicted on Figure 1 (see attached 22” x 36” foldout). Through the methodology described below, each of the above sites has been investigated, documented, and evaluated by the consultant team as to how it is currently serving the public as recreational fishing access facility (i.e., the quality of fishing offered by the site’s location within the bay, compatibility with surrounding land and water uses, existing fishing and support infrastructure, etc.) as well as its suitability for potential facilities improvements. Based on the findings of these

evaluations, the consultant team has provided recommendations as to the relative priority of each site for potential investment in capital improvements to recreational fishing facilities.

II. METHODOLOGY

The consultant team performed the following tasks in the development of site evaluations for the 22 alternative access sites:

1. Site visits were conducted by the prime consultant (GRA) to each of the 22 sites to document and photograph the existing conditions of each site. Conducted from July though September of 2005, these visits serve as the foundation for the site evaluations contained in this report. Through these visits, a standard inventory was taken of each site with respect to the following:

- *access and surrounding uses*, including access route from the surrounding roadway network; surrounding land and water uses; any time of day and/or seasonal restrictions for the site; bicycle, pedestrian, and public transit accessibility.
- *site parking*, including type(s) and condition of public parking facilities; capacity and observed use; any shared uses; parking restrictions; walking distance from parking to fishing spots.
- *recreational fishing at the site*, including the overall capacity of the site for recreational fishing, the specific locations (structures and/or natural features) fished from; if applicable, the condition, safety, handicap accessibility, and quality of access offered by existing fishing structures (e.g. docks, piers, breakwaters); site amenities (trash receptacles, restrooms, etc,); the overall cleanliness and maintenance of the site.
- *feasibility for improvements/development*, considering the apparent constructability of fishing access structures (i.e., dock/pier structure), and landside improvements (additional parking, amenities, etc.) based on preliminary observations of existing site conditions, current uses, environmental constraints, etc.

The *Site Visit Inventory Forms* completed at the time of visit to each site are provided in Appendix D of this document. In addition to this documentation, recreational anglers and other individuals (including non-fishing site visitors, park workers, nearby residents) present at the time of visit were interviewed to gain further insight as to the character of fishing offered at the site, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the site's shoreline access facilities, any historical trends in the fishing use and productivity of the site, and other factors affecting the public's use and enjoyment of the site. Where appropriate, the consultant contacted local officials, organizations, fishing groups and/or individuals with knowledge of or association with specific evaluation sites to ascertain additional information.

2. The wetland biologist sub-consultant (Applied Bio-Systems, Inc.) conducted visits to each of the 22 sites to document the natural character of the surrounding coastal environment, existing coastal features, and whether eelgrass and/or any other significant environmental attributes are present which could affect potential development at the site. Rhode Island Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data was also reviewed by the marine biologist to determine whether eel grass beds are documented in the vicinity of sites. The above information was evaluated in the context of State and Federal regulatory agency requirements to determine the environmental suitability of potential fishing access development at each of the shoreline sites.

Certain development activities in or near the coastal waters of the Narragansett Bay study area require authorization from State and Federal regulatory agencies having jurisdiction over the area or activity. All of the alternative access sites under evaluation in this report fall under the jurisdiction of the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), and construction activities within waters of the State require Water Quality Certification by the RIDEM Office of Water Resources. Relative to the potential implementation of capital improvements to recreational fishing facilities, the requirements/regulations of each are briefly described below.

Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC). Pursuant to the regulatory authority of the CRMC in permitting development activities within the State's coastal margin, an application for Coastal Assent would be required in accordance with the *Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Program (CRMP)*. Where activities are permissible by water type classification, applications for Assent are reviewed as either Category A or Category B depending upon the nature and extent of work proposed, the coastal feature, and the CRMC water type classification at the site. Category A applications generally apply to minor activities known to have little or no potential for adverse environmental impact, whereas Category B applications generally apply to activities having a greater potential for environmental impact (thus requiring that the applicant further demonstrate that adverse impacts will be avoided and/or mitigated, issuance of public notice, etc.). Additional permit requirements may also apply depending on whether the site is located within the boundaries of a CRMC Special Area Management Plan (SAMP). While the *CRMP* "Red Book" should be consulted for actual application and permit requirements, the following would generally apply to the potential development of recreational fishing improvements at the alternative access sites under evaluation:

- Construction of a new pier or floating dock (including extension and/or reconfiguration of such an existing structure) would be reviewed as a Category B application. An actual Submerged Aquatic Vegetative (eel grass) Survey would also be required for any such proposed activity. As this activity is prohibited in CRMC Type 1 (Conservation Area) waters, a Special Exception request would be required for any proposed development in these waters (requiring the applicant to demonstrate compelling public benefit, etc. - see CRMP Section 130)
- Development activities outside of coastal waters but within the 200-foot CRMC regulatory buffer (e.g., landscaping, amenities, additional parking) would be reviewed as Category A or B depending upon the nature and extent of work proposed. If included in the scope of a proposed project which includes the construction/extension of fishing structures as described above, the project would be reviewed as a Category B application.
- Maintenance of an existing pier or dock structure within its existing footprint would likely be reviewed as a *Maintenance Application* if it is a repair of less than 50% of the structure.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE). The ACOE has regulatory jurisdiction over development activities in coastal and inland waters of the United States. Activities involving pile-supported structures and floats (including piers and docks) are generally permitted by the ACOE under the Department of the Army Programmatic General Permit (PGP) for the State of Rhode Island. Application is made directly to the CRMC, whereupon copies of the application are forwarded to the ACOE for review and determination of eligibility for the PGP. Where applicable, the ACOE will coordinate with the U.S. Coast Guard to determine if the proposed project could potentially impact navigation. The following would generally

apply to the potential development of recreational fishing improvements at the alternative access sites under evaluation:

- Maintenance and rehabilitation activities are generally considered PGP Category 1 activities, and do not require separate application to, and project-specific authorization in writing from, the ACOE.
- Construction of piers, docks, decks, floats and similar structures that provide recreational uses (such as fishing, swimming, public access, etc.) are considered as PGP Category 2 activities, requiring written approval from the CRMC, which will include a written authorization from the ACOE if appropriate.

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) / Section 401 Water Quality Certification. In accordance with Section 401 of the Federal Clean Water Act, proposed construction activities within coastal zone waters require a Water Quality Certificate (WQC) from the RIDEM Office of Water Resources. This review process ensures that the proposed activity will not result in the degradation of the surrounding tidal waters. Application is made directly to the RIDEM Office of Water Resources on forms provided for this purpose. Although CRMC will notify the Water Quality Certification Program of a pending development project, the design plans and other information submitted to the CRMC must be attached to a separate application prepared for the WQC.

- The project narrative must describe the scope of work, description of the aquatic resources and community structure in the area, and the anticipated water quality impacts resulting from the entire project as proposed.
- The review process is based on whether the proposed project will have any significant impacts upon the water quality classification and/or aquatic community in that area.

In each of the site assessments that follow, a short narrative describing the site's natural character and environmental constraints relevant to potential development (and permitting thereof) is provided. This information includes the coastal feature(s) of the site, the CRMC water type, documented or observed presence/absence of eelgrass beds, adjacent freshwater wetlands, and/or other natural features.

3. The marine biologist sub-consultant (James H. McKenna, Ph.D.) researched, compiled and analyzed available water quality, fisheries, and biodiversity data over the Narragansett Bay study area to assess the relative quality of waters and presence of species of recreational interest in the vicinity of each shoreline site. The primary documents developed through these investigations are provided in Appendix B (*Water Quality Assessment*) and Appendix C (*Fish Abundance and Diversity Assessment*) of this report. Summary information from the above studies is provided as part of the individual site assessments contained herein.

4. To solicit public input and gain further understanding of the needs, preferences, and concerns of the user base, the consultant team developed an internet-based recreational fishing survey as a supplemental component of this study. Hosted by the RIDEM on the Department's web site (www.dem.ri.gov), the *2005 Online Recreational Fishing Survey* was open to public participation from June through September, during which a total a 387 responses were received. A thorough commentary and analysis of survey results is provided in Appendix A of this document.

III. SITE EVALUATIONS

Contained in this document are individual site evaluation reports for each of the 22 alternative access sites evaluated through this study, as well as a baseline summary evaluation of the Old Jamestown Bridge Site. Presented in a narrative format, each report has been developed to offer objective, qualitative documentation of the conditions and function of the site with respect to the quality of public fishing access currently offered. Reports have been further augmented with graphics (aerial photographs, locus maps, nautical chart images) as well as site photographs taken by GRA during site visits conducted July through September, 2005. All aerial, NOAA nautical map, and USGS topographic imagery was obtained through license with Rhode Island Geographic Information Systems (RIGIS), R.I. Department of Administration, Statewide Planning Program. Aerial photography was taken in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Aerial Photography Field Office as part of the National Agricultural Imagery Program (NAIP). Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs, maps, and figures are not to scale.

Content

Each site evaluation is introduced with a brief description, which contains such essential information as its location within the State and the Narragansett Bay study area, ownership of the landside site and facilities, primary fishing features and usage of the site, as well as any noteworthy attributes affecting its function in providing shoreline fishing access to the public. Following this description, the consultant team's evaluation is structured by analyses of the site's (a) location and (b) facilities and how each contributes to the public's accessibility to and enjoyment of recreational fishing at the shoreline site.

The *Location Assessment* takes into account those qualities of the shoreline site inherently tied to its location, both along the Narragansett Bay study area shoreline and within the State, its transportation network, and existing land infrastructure. Bay location is considered with regard to the quality of bay waters accessed at the site, historical fishing use and productivity of the site (including commonly reported catch from the Online Recreational Fishing Survey), as well as any other surrounding water uses (such as beach, harbor, boating uses) which currently affect fishing use and/or would affect potential development at the site. The site's land location is similarly evaluated by examining shared uses of the landside facility, surrounding land uses, and the regional accessibility of the site for the Rhode Island population (existing transportation infrastructure, proximity to public transit) as they relate to current recreational fishing use and/or potential development. This component of the assessment also documents the existing environmental character of the shoreline site (including coastal features, CRMC water type, presence/absence of eel grass) relative to the potential development of fishing facilities and the regulatory permitting requirements thereof.

The *Facilities Assessment* addresses those physical infrastructure elements of the shoreline site which are either essential or accessory to recreational fishing use. For the structural and/or natural features fished from at the site, the evaluation considers the qualities of fishing access, capacity, safety, and accessibility offered by existing facilities. Features of the site which support fishing use are also duly considered, including parking facilities (type, capacity, condition, proximity to fishing), access roadways, and site amenities (restrooms, trash receptacles, benches, surrounding park elements, etc.). As they affect the character and overall enjoyment of the site, this assessment also addresses the site's maintenance, cleanliness, and aesthetics, as well as its conduciveness to pedestrian and bicycle use.

Also provided as part of each evaluation are qualitative ratings of certain components which are fundamental to the quality of recreational fishing access currently offered by the shoreline site. While by no means comprehensive, these components readily lend themselves to the objective assignment of a rating based on the consultant team's documentation and evaluation. Furthermore, the existing features of a particular site are rated relative to those of the other evaluation sites, providing a basic means of comparison among the 22 shoreline access sites (which vary widely in terms of their character, facilities, capacity, etc.) in certain key areas.

Site attributes which have been assigned an existing conditions rating (poor/fair/good/excellent) as part of this study consist of the following:

- *Existing Fishing Facilities* - independent of the quality of bay waters and fishing productivity, the overall quality of access offered by the site's structure(s) and/or natural shoreline features, including water depths accessed, ease of access, safety, capacity relative to current use/demand, etc.;
- *Parking* - the capacity and quality of available public parking for fishing use at (or in the vicinity of) the site;
- *Compatibility with Surrounding Land / Water Uses* - the congruence of recreational fishing at the site with surrounding land and water uses, and whether any use conflicts currently exist;
- *Statewide Transportation Accessibility / Public Transit* - how accessible the landside site is to the public, specifically the Rhode Island population base that the RIDEM is charged with serving;
- *Site Aesthetics* - the overall visual character of the shoreline site and surroundings.

Additionally, the *Water Quality* of the bay in the vicinity of each site has been assigned a rating (low/medium/high) based on the investigations conducted by the marine biologist sub-consultant (see Appendix B). While this rating offers insight to the relative biological quality of bay waters supporting recreational fisheries stocks, is important to note that it does not account for the historical use and productivity of the site. For example, despite exhibiting low water quality characteristics, several upper bay locations nonetheless offer ample opportunity for catching certain species of interest and continue to function as popular shoreline fishing sites.

Lastly, each site evaluation is provided with the consultant team's recommendation as to its *Priority for Capital Improvements*. Measured relative to the opportunity for public fishing access development offered by the Old Jamestown Bridge Site, each site has been designated a priority of low, medium, or high. Provided in the evaluation is the consultant team's rationale as to how the rating was arrived, taking into account the current condition of fishing access offered at the site (how it is currently maximizing its potential as a recreational fishing site); its overall capacity, current use, and accessibility; the quality of waters/fisheries accessed at the bay location; and the site's suitability for the cost-effective implementation of capital improvements (taking into account available area for development, existing infrastructure, surrounding uses, environmental/regulatory constraints, etc.). Also discussed in this part of the evaluation are the types of capital improvements (if any) that appear to be potentially feasible at the site based on the preliminary evaluations conducted. For sites designated a priority other than "low", a rudimentary qualitative estimate of the investment required for such improvements is included. Based on the engineering judgment of the prime consultant (GRA), these estimates are provided according to the following scale: low (less than $100,000), moderate ($100,000 - $300,000), high (greater than $300,000).

Findings

In general, the alternative access sites evaluated through this study are very diverse in terms of their size, capacity, character, and quality of fishing access currently offered. Several of these sites were found to be quite functional in providing an enjoyable shoreline fishing experience, whereas others were observed to be deficient in several of the aforementioned criteria. While on the surface it would appear reasonable that the sites currently functioning poorly would be most deserving of capital improvements, development at these sites is often not warranted (by the quality of waters and fisheries in the vicinity of the site, the investment required, etc.) and/or not feasible (due to existing uses, size of the parcel, environmental constraints, etc.). Similarly, sites currently providing adequate or good recreational fishing, while less in need of improvements, are equally likely to have constraints that would render the location unsuitable for shoreline development.

With the exception of the Burma Road Middletown site (No. 11), each of the 22 alternative access sites was found to have one or more inherent limitations that would preclude the development of moderate to large-scale recreational fishing pier facility (such as that which could potentially be developed at the Old Jamestown Bridge Site). Accordingly, only the Burma Road Middletown site has been assigned a Priority for Capital Improvements of "high" (see Site Evaluation No. 11, Page 11-1). Several of these alternative sites could however benefit from the implementation of smaller-scale improvements that would serve to enhance the public's use and enjoyment of the site, which are discussed further in the individual site evaluations.

It is also evident through the investigations conducted for this study that the State needs more viable shoreline access locations for families, persons with disabilities, and the elderly to fish. Several respondents to the *2005 Online Recreational Fishing Survey* who commented on this issue suggested that a recreational fishing pier would help address this need. Through a comprehensive consideration of the 22 alternative sites for fishing access evaluated in the document, it appears that the Old Jamestown Bridge Site remains a practicable location for providing the public such quality access to shoreline recreational fishing in Narragansett Bay.

Examined in detail through the first phase of this study (see *Volume 1: Evaluation of the Old Jamestown Bridge Site*), the location of the Old Jamestown Bridge Site offers excellent access to the quality fishing in the waters of the West Passage, is centrally located within the Lower Bay, and is readily accessible to the State's population via Route 138. Though the scale of development would be limited to an extent due to the landside parcel size (limiting the extent to which parking and other facilities can be provided on-site) and the residential uses which flank the shoreline site (limiting pedestrian accessibility), it appears that these limitations could be overcome through proper design and management (including a path connection to the park and ride lot at Route 1A, landscaping, etc.). As the Old Jamestown Bridge currently occupies this location in the West Passage, development of a new pier structure on this footprint would not impact existing water uses in the vicinity.

It is also important to consider that there remains a strong negative perception among the residents of surrounding neighborhoods with regard to recreational fishing at the Old Jamestown Bridge. This sentiment can be traced back to the years immediately following the opening of the Jamestown-Verrazano Bridge. During this period the old bridge remained accessible (but unsanctioned) for recreational fishing, however the site was neither maintained nor monitored, and its use was marred by littering, vandalism, and concerns over safety. Furthermore, the site was accessible only by local roads flanking Route 138 (Fleetwood Drive, Plum Point Road), resulting in undesirable impacts to the character of these residential

neighborhoods. For the development of public fishing pier and park to be viable at the Old Jamestown Bridge Site, the State must commit to (a) the long-term maintenance and management of the both landside and pier facilities, and (b) ensuring that adverse impacts to surrounding uses are effectively mitigated in the design and operation of the facility.

From a broad perspective, development of a recreational fishing pier at the Old Jamestown Bridge Site also appears to have strong support from the recreational fishing public. When asked for locations within the study area they believe would be ideal for the development of a public recreational fishing pier, approximately 40% of respondents to the *2005 Online Recreational Fishing Survey* suggested the Old Jamestown Bridge Site. The next most often suggested location (Rocky Point, Warwick) was provided by approximately 8% of respondents.

While the State should continue to maintain and improve public shoreline fishing access throughout Narragansett Bay, the Old Jamestown Bridge Site and the Burma Road Middletown site appear to offer the best opportunities for the development of recreational fishing pier facilities in Rhode Island.